MEMORIAL SERVICE

DANA LEWESE FERGUSON MYERS

October 31, 2008

Fourth Presbyterian Church

John Buchanan, Pastor

Something is seriously out of order today. Parents are not supposed to have to bury their children. Older colleagues are not supposed to have to say good-bye to lose one of their own in the middle of life. Something is seriously out of order, and so we are here to stand close to one another, to share the pain of grief: to gather around Wayne and Daniel and Taylor (whose loss is enormous) and Betsy and Liz to offer our love and support and prayers.

And we are here to put this whole matter before God, the one who brought order out of chaos in creation, the one whose steadfast love is the one constant, permanent reality in the midst of every situation, every day, every birth, every death: the one who loves so much as to give an only son: the one who knows the profound grief of a parent watching a precious child die.

And we are here to remember that God's supreme gift of love did not end with death, that Jesus Christ is risen and that all of life is so profoundly different, saved, redeemed, even death itself, redeemed. "A Witness to the Resurrection," our Presbyterian Church calls it and that is what it is: a celebration of Good News, news so good

it will not be contained by our best and most eloquent words. News that must be shouted and sung and played on organ and brass, and lived daily in lives that are victorious, safe, secure, loved by God: lives happily given away to God's will and God's kingdom because nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from God's love in that Christ Jesus.

Dana Lewese Ferguson Myers died much too soon. All of us are here today because we had more living to do with Dana, more working together, and praying and worshipping, and laughing. Her colleague and friend John Wilkinson, when he heard about her death, said simply, "She made us laugh more than anyone." We wanted to see what would

happen next: we wanted to watch her continue to grow and mature and become the amazing woman God created her to be.

And yet, upon reflection, it seems to me that Dana used up all the life God gave her, lived it joyfully, intentionally, passionately. It won't cause us to miss her less but it does occur to me that Dana figured out how to cram 70 or 80 years into 40 and that while God shares our grief, God may also be smiling and thinking — "that's what I mean: that life is the way life is to be lived."

Dana's formative years were in Mississippi, Batesville; she claimed her heritage, was proud of it, entertained us

endlessly with affectionate stories of life in Batesville.

On the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women to ministry in the Presbyterian Church, November 6, 2005, three years ago this Sunday, I asked Dana to share the preaching duties and to tell a little about how she came to be where she was. She was at her best that day.

She said that when she graduated from college she gave her parents a plaque that read, "I am because of my parents' love." She went on to say "I am because of the love of many people and because of the love of God."

She remembered thinking at the age of ten that maybe she'd be a preacher one day — and being so secure in the love of her home and church that she didn't notice that there weren't many, if any, women ministers around.

She told us that Betsy, her mother, was the first woman elected elder in that Batesville Presbyterian congregation. And that when Betsy told her mother, a member of a conservative Presbyterian church that does not ordain women, Dana's grandmother said, "That is just lovely, Betsy, but please don't tell my friends."

She told us that her mother was among many important, formative and formidable women in her life. Bothe

grandmothers were divorced — both became successful businesswomen — Annie Mama and her sister ran a "Dime Store" and grandmother Ferguson ran the family funeral business. Both were faithful and committed church women.

She named some of the Presbyterian saints who taught her to believe, held her tightly when, in her own words, she was "rebelling as best and hard as I could."

They never gave up on me, Dana said, never stopped telling me I was one of God's beloved and chosen. "That was a monumental message to me," Dana said. But it didn't go without another — that the world is full of the goodness of

God — God's people and resources and we are called to the business of sharing.

"My family, teachers, members and colleagues taught me over and over that I am important and valued. And that all the world's people are important and valued — and it is through these people that I have heard God's affirmation of a call to ministry that I heard even at a very young age."

After High School Dana went to Hollins College — a classic Southern women's school where she made dear and life-long friendships. Hollins College motto is "I lift up my eyes unto the hills" — from Psalm 121 which Dana asked to be read today.

She met Wayne Myers at Princeton Seminary at a weekend for students thinking about ministry. They became friends — and met again on the first day of the fall term, after both had enrolled at Princeton. The way the story goes, Wayne pulled up behind Dana's car. She reintroduced herself — "Hi, I'm Dana Ferguson." Wayne responded romantically, "Yeah, I know." It was all the encouragement she needed and the rest, as they say, is history.

She came to Fourth Church from Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. In fact, the pastor — her mentor and friend Jim Lowery, recommended her to us: Wayne was coming to Oak Park, Fair Oaks Church, and Dana was available. She is,

however, pregnant, Jim said, and she was, hugely so when she came to my office for a first interview. Properly trained not to say anything she finally said — "You know I'm pregnant, don't you?" I said "yes." She said — "I just want you to know I won't be this big the next time you see me."

She had a very distinguished ministry in Memphis — and those formative influences of God's inclusive live and the human justice that proceeds from it guided her. She led a church initiative to respond to homelessness by building a transitional housing facility with supporting services, such as job training, to work with people from poverty to independence. She led an after school

education program called *Logos*, and insisted that it include not only the children of Idlewild church — but African American children from the inner city — and it worked. Wayne said one of his precious memories is seeing black and white children from the Logos program, walking hand in hand for ice cream — down the sidewalk in downtown Memphis — a sight not often, if ever, seen at that time.

She arrived at Fourth Presbyterian Church eleven years ago to serve as Associate Pastor for Mission and her style and vision and commitment were felt immediately. She supervised our existing mission program, and began to think broadly about the next chapter for Fourth Church. She learned about

Cabrini Green and their new Chicago Housing Authority's and Mayor's plan for transition, a bold experiment in creating an urban community, economically, racially and socially diverse. "We need to be part of that," she said and went to work talking with politicians, bureaucrats, real estate developers, advocacy groups, community activists. And the result was the purchase of a piece of property on Chicago Avenue — for a Community Center, a bridge institution for the newly diverse neighbors. She was rightfully proud of Chicago Avenue — and the garden that is there currently.

And Dana inspired us to broaden our mission vision to be authentically global. She inspired and led mission

trips and Fourth Church investments — in Cuba and the work of the First Presbyterian Church of Havana. Honduras — where Fourth Church purchased property, donated it to Habitat for Humanity and helped build houses for poor families and single mothers. Israel-Palestine where Fourth Church worked and invested in both Israel and Palestine. New Orleans — where we have sent several mission teams to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. She insisted on going along and participating in these trips — even when it was apparent that she was not well. There she is — perspiring in the hot Louisiana sun, carpenter's apron, bandana on her head.

After successfully battling cancer a few years ago — she returned to work, this time as Executive Associate Pastor, responsible for the day-to-day operations of this complex church. She led with vision, utter dependability, a capacity for details — and budgeting, and management that was a priceless contribution to this church.

In the midst of all that, Dana somehow managed to give priority attention to her marriage, to Wayne and Daniel and Taylor. I don't know how she did it — but her home was beautiful, her garden neat, her children spotless. Someone gave her a hoodie recently with "Wonder Woman" on the front and she was.

She was a lover of life — and it expressed itself in her attire, a collection of colorful tights that she somehow managed to coordinate with a clerical collar, great hits at weddings and Easter.

She was practical, pragmatic — always watching the subtle details of every church function. Two weeks ago she spoke first to Calum MacLeod and then to me about her funeral: what she wanted and didn't want. She didn't want this much talk about her, she wanted me to preach a sermon she said (a full sermon she said, not one of those little funeral meditations). I have concluded that her life itself was a more eloquent witness to the gospel than I could compose. She chose the hymns

and scripture and particularly wanted the presence of the Morning Choir and Tower Brass — such integral parts of the worship life of the church she so dearly loved.

Dana was a believer. Jesus was her Lord whom she decided to follow in every way she could. In spite of her flamboyance, her unrestrained laughter — her passionate embrace of life — Elvis Presley, Great Ribs at a downtown dive in Memphis she insisted I visit once — Cubs baseball — or perhaps not in spite of but because of it, those of us privileged to be close to her knew how deep and authentic her own spirituality was.

She preached with such liveliness and integrity. She complained loudly every time I asked her to preach, and this created a homiletical gem. And her prayers — who will ever forget them? It was pure, simple, poetry, as she brought into our prayers the big issues of the day: race and justice, war and peace, health care and education, and the small, intimate matters that are in our hearts: the children going off to school for the first time — parents waving goodbye with tears in their eyes. The college freshman — on her own for the first time, excited and afraid.

I had the great privilege of visiting with her in the hospital these past weeks, as did all of her colleagues at one time or another. Calum — who

came to Fourth Church at about the same time Dana did, was a particularly close and faithful colleague and friend.

Dana knew, perhaps more than any of us were willing to acknowledge, how very sick she was. She underwent two surgeries, but almost daily procedures that were painful — and never complained. Her resilience and courage will inspire me as long as I live.

On World Communion Sunday — two of her dearest friend, both Elders in this church, Beth Davis and Marc Miller, asked if we could take communion to Dana. Ali Trowbridge and I joined them and Allison Chisolm, at Dana's bedside Sunday afternoon. We read scripture, the same passages that were in the

Sunday morning services, prayed and read the simple communion liturgy. She had not had anything by mouth for weeks, could not have anything by mouth. We hadn't thought about it, frankly. So I said something like — "Dana you can't actually eat this bread or drink the wine." "I know," she said, "but let me feel it — let me touch it with my lips."

Dana preached the last time on April 20th. Her text was the story of the stoning of Stephen — It's a remarkable sermon.

She said if she'd have been a new Christian and Stephen was stoned she'd be concerned — rip-roaring mad even. Christ promised life abundant, and

declared that death is gone — and here comes death storming back.

Dana lived with a heightened sense of her own mortality and so when she said things like that, you knew they came from deep in her soul.

She talked about Randy Pausch, the Carnegie Mellon Professor — who had been told that he had only a few months to live and kept on teaching until the very end and talking openly about what was happening to him.

She quoted from a Diane Sawyer-*Nighttime* interview in which Sawyer said something about how unfair it all was.

Pausch said — “Don’t think it’s unfair. I was unlucky, but it wasn’t unfair.”

Dana reflected — “Unfair. It’s how we often want to characterize things when a loved one has gotten bad news. But Pausch is right — it may be tragic, heart-wrenching, ill-timed, illogical, debilitating. So we gather as people have for generations to grieve and console one another. Yet, as deep and real as our grief may be — it isn’t death that is unfair.”

And then Dana preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ: “For you see” she said, “life is a gift. It is a gift that comes to us free and clear. At the beginning we are given no guarantees or warranties

or agreements. Unfair is when we've been assured one thing will happen and another does. That isn't the case here. There is a promise that comes with life in Christ and it is this: 'I will be with you always.' That's it. That's the promise. And it's here and now for which we continually strive. But it doesn't end there. It goes on eternally. Jesus says to the disciples, 'When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.' When all is done here on earth, all isn't done for us in Christ. In fact, all is made complete."

A few decades after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, St. Paul was writing to a small community of believers in Rome. He's trying to find

words for an orderly presentation of the Gospel. It's the first attempt at a Christian theology. And in the middle of the letter — he's thinking about the future — which for him, at the moment, is not very promising.

"I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."

And then Paul asks the fundamental religious question . . ."What is to become of us?" and stammers an answer:

“If God is for us who can be against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress, or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword?”

We might add — debilitating illness, slow, progressively profound, mysteriously undiagnosable illness.

“No” Paul almost shouts— “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

And then the powerful, precious witness: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor

anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I saw her the afternoon before she died. I recited that passage as nearly as I could before we prayed. When I left — she was alone — I turned to look one more time through the glass of her ICU room, I waved and she summoned a smile and a small wave.

And I thought "more than conquerors . . ."

God loved Dana while she lived and she knew it.

God loves her now — now and forever.

Thanks be to God.